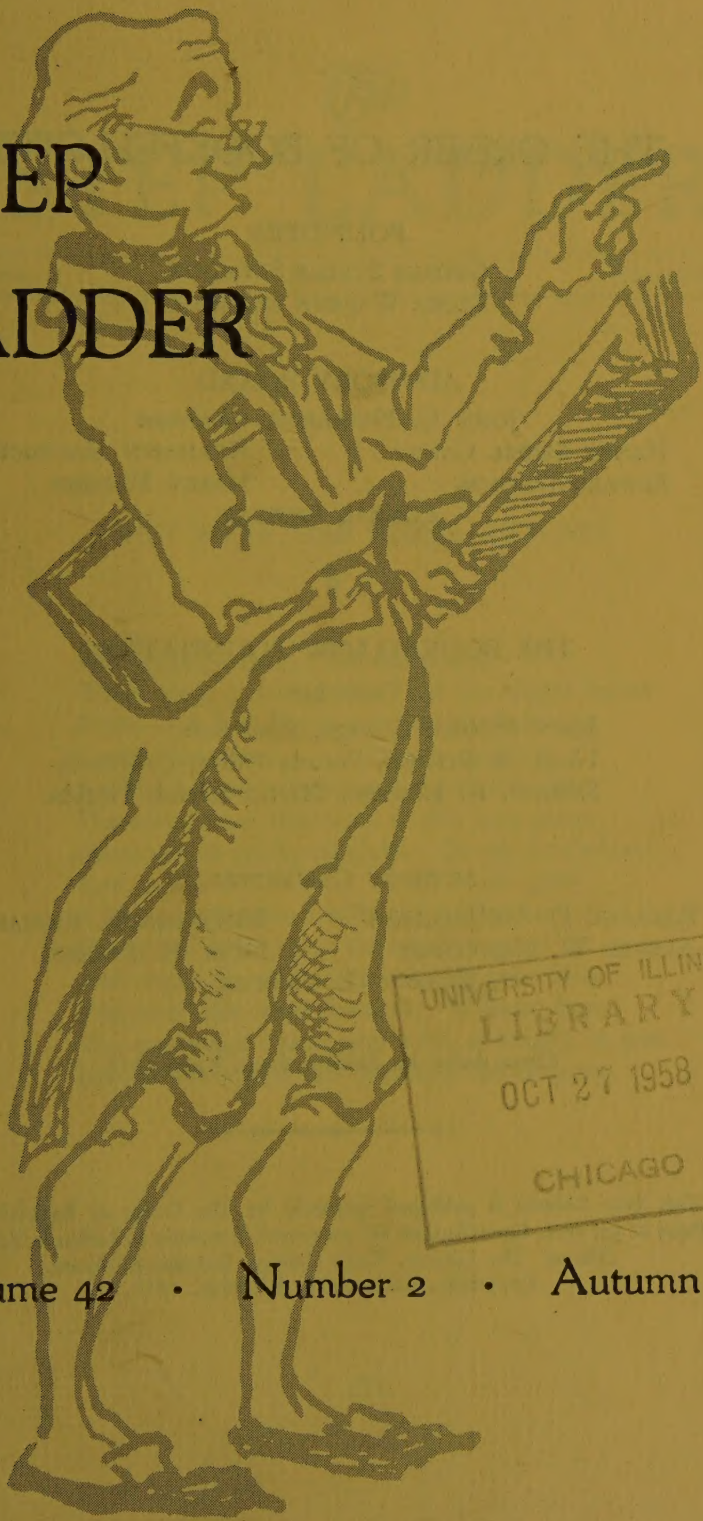
The STEP LADDER



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Volume 42 • Number 2 • Autumn 1958

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THE STEP LADDER is published quarterly by The Order of Bookfellows. Price $2 per year. Contributions are welcomed. Benjamin B. Richards, Editor. Offices: The Library, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois.

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The
STEP LADDER

VOL. 42, NO. 2 AUTUMN 1958 GALESBURG, ILLINOIS

WILLIS EBERMAN

YOU WERE LIKE REGAL AUTUMN

Always in Autumn I remember you:
When earth grows golden, and the maple leaves
Rustle and drift above the burnished sheaves,
I must remember. . . . Russety and few
Are the hanging apples in the orchard now;
The rutted road that leads to this lone place,
Shimmers in smoky sunlight. Queen-Ann's-Lace,
And thistle thrive. . . . Often in the glow
of the gourd-moon I walk the garden here;
Or lay me down upon the crinkled grass
And watch the stars, remembering your face.
You were like regal Autumn. Without fear,
You conquered much; and went, at length, to pass
Beyond the world, like Autumn, full of grace.

CHRISTMAS BERRIES

The pyracanth is blazing with berries.
I shall clip off clusters for Christmas,
being aware
of thorns at my wrists and my fingers.
Perhaps I shall stare
again, for a moment, at a bead of blood
on my thumb, and know
the thorn more dexterous than I; then go,
gingerly holding the Christmas gems to the
hearth.
I will take away,
For the time, the brass ship's light and
the driftwood from the mantel; they
have had it all year . . .
What joy it will be to arrange
the glowing clusters there; they will not
look strange
in pyramidal design; and I shall light
a profusion of colored candles around them
on Christmas night.

HE WAS A MAN OF MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS

He had always been a man of mountains and valleys.

When he talked you could feel the pull of the ropes
and see his eyes squint in the sunlight.
He took pinnacles no one else knew were there;
He could go straight up a mountain of the mind
and stand astride the top with the dare-devil not yet
hushed in his throat.

But then, there were times when the ropes went slack
and he cared less than you did.
He would drop his hold, sliding like an icicle
into the jagged rocks below.
His eyes, as dull as used-up suns,
would float in a cool pool of space.

And you never knew how to help, for you hadn't been in
his valley,
and only a time or so had glimpsed his mountain.

MENTAL HOEING

Breaking the soil of her mind
Was an old habit as she plied
The hoe back and forth over the year
To see its design, the cut and stripped
Images of reason stacked in rows
Of answered arguments. Opposed
In this struggle with matted grass
And stubborn clay, tearfully she hacked
To extricate the weeds and prepare
For another spring, one unsnared
By questions rooted in the past.

Here she attacked the clods with wrath
Until she trampled holes in the ground
And her thoughts crumpled down
Taking her strength with them.

Aching from remembered resentment
Soon she turned upon herself
But moved lightly now and penitent
To ease the nature of rebel soil
And soften it, to make it pliable
To the new seeds, the new demands
Of the changing season, knowing plants
Thrive better in kindness than bitterness

And suddenly, the year stood plain, at rest.

SOMETHING BETWEEN

Something comes between us
Like the shadow of a cloud upon a hill
Lying gold and green on a summer's day
With face up toward the sun
When suddenly the air grows chill
And we move apart as the hill turns gray.

Something comes between us.
The swell of the sea can reverse the sky
As quickly as a ship that rides down its bow
While the waves climb up
Shifting the perspective of the eye
From its reasoned course to the plunging now.

Something comes between us
And we see each other across the room
Through a wall of glass that splinters into sound
As soon as our voices stir
The image of the afternoon
Shattering its fragments on the ground.

Something comes between us
Like a remembered tune that each one starts
At a separate tempo in a different key
Humming one by one
As though to rehearse the solo parts
Before the performance that is never ready.

Something comes between us.
The curl of a cigarette can twist a smile
More subtly than a knife between the teeth

And leave the air as numb
Until the hound thoughts break their file
And leap across the long night's sleepless heath.

Something comes between us
Like the drift of fog passing outside
Our windowed light when the fire crackles red.
It seems to stop and rub
Its hands, then throw the door wide
Open, until we notice the fire is dead.

ALL THIS, BEFORE

I raced, I rushed, I ran
To catch the empty hand of time
Before the wind, the blowing wind
This breathless gift.

I willed, I worked, I wept
To melt the frozen face of time
Before the sun, the burning sun
This frenzied bone.

I drank, I danced, I dared
To tempt the stony foot of time
Before the rain, the driving rain
This raptured flame.

I leaped, I laughed, I loved
To ease the burdened heart of time
Before the dust, the settling dust
This flesh and blood.

LAKE MOMENT, SUNSET

We saw the turning sun upon it
like a smitten shield
and the dark trees bending over
as a chorus in Euripides.
Air hung and waited the encroaching night
for one breath's length withheld
the closeness and the terror.

For this one glittering moment darkness waited.
we stood beside the lake as new as adam
and ancient as the first light over the first sea
ancient and drenched in thought beyond all thought
(one first man looked upon the Mediterranean
as we look out upon the sea of stars
and know it ours).

And we were hushed as reeds around the lake
empty and full as reeds that siphon water.
We drank the fabled air
we lived through that baptism of light on water
born for a moment by the sunset lake
and innocent as adam.

WILLIAM, MY TWO UNCLES

I will never forget my uncles.
Two of a few of a kind, they were,
both William;
and the recollection is portrait-perfect,
like old-maids' children . . .
In spite of town records,
both men wore labels all their lives,
'Lo Bill' and 'Hi Will';
tagged young like arboretum trees.
The nicknames echo now that they are gone.

A disenchanted man, my Uncle Bill,
who always described exactly what he'd seen;
while Uncle Will
explained the way he felt about things he saw.
I can remember a day
when Hi Will clutched a mysterious package,
and with face glowing,
told me he'd found a mess of haw haw trees
loaded with tee-hees; then he stumbled upstairs.

When the uncles refused to visit each other,
most folks blamed it on their school days;
but Granddad insisted
they quarreled after reaching manhood,
while Bill was a guest at Will's hunting shack.
Seems Will had a hound dog;
and as they sat there at that midday meal,
Bill blurted out,
"How come this dog of yours keeps eyeing me?"
Will snickered, "You're eating out of his dish."

That's putting salt on a tale:
for Bill had an expectancy of good in folk,
        leastways, he hurt easily;
but Will's day for being tactful hadn't spawned.
He said, "With two on a horse, one rides behind."
That got Bill's dander up.
Tapping his temple with a stubby forefinger,
        he scornfully declared,
"What Will says, is sound . . . merely sound."
And so it went. Bitter things happen that way.

These wiveless men
"Never got to set in each other's house again,"
        according to my Dad;
who insisted it must have been food not fate
that brought them together at our place.
In my Dad's book,
these uncles mixed and mingled out of spite.
        I've heard him muttering
as he watched them stash away the victuals
"Thanks be to Gideon, caterpillars can't mate."

Whenever Will gave me the wink,
I'd skitter out through the woodshed door,
        and away we'd go.
My tall uncle was never at home in a chair;
even the rain tapped out music on his heart
at blueberry picking time;
he would stretch out full length on a hummock,
        and let me pick, yes sir,
because he was stricken on each hand, so he said,
"with four thumbs and a nervous pinkie."

I never had much use
for the hanging rope at the old swimming hole,
until Will confided,
"Frogs dive without holding their noses."
Such assurance took the fear out of fact.
When he reckoned,
"Life ain't all you want, but it's all you got,"
I adored him. Always will.
And that which we cherish, we defend. I did;
for joy comes with the things that claim us.

When I'd pester Bill, he'd say,
"I don't like to answer questions directly;
want to reveal me, slowlike."
"Nevvy," he'd warn, "Be not heedless, nor daring,
be positive; no ifs. No ifs, was a one I knew."
And once he sadly said,
"She was a right sensible woman, rest her soul;
and a good woman on earth
would be better than an extra angel in heaven."
Then off he stomped, sighing and hurtlike.

Imagination opened the door
to thoughts of Maw's younger sister . . .
and a ripe theme evolved
like a spirally peeled three-foot orange,
intriguing me into the richness it contained.
Every once in a while
we become aware of all we can't remember.
Strange, isn't it?
Maybe, it's because they said it . . . They?
The ones who say all those things.

WHAT HAS THIS HAND?

What has this hand to say?
I look at it, in its palm. And there are lines
that mean things. That mean I have worked, I have tried
with water and wood and metal; and when it was done,
what was it?

I look at my hand.
It has tongues that could speak, but they are tied.
Come, pore, let it out. Bone,
is it sealed in your marrow?
Does it ache there?
I shake my hand and I cry to it, Say! Say! Say!
Say now!
While the blood runs in your veins and nerves carry
impulse to your muscles.
Say, while I am here to tell you what to say!

But my hand will not speak.
It keeps the counsel of its lines, of its calluses,
of its new flesh, of its old flesh, of its softness,
of its redness, its whiteness, its bulging veins and arteries,
its tendons.
Even its nails are stubborn, are impenetrable.

Is it, hand, that you will not till you decay?
That only then, when I am not here to tell you what to say,
you will lay
open your bone and let out your cataclysmic word
and no one, nothing to direct it
where it may be heard?

A VERSE AWAY

A verse away the world was kinder:
Even in the ruins I gathered paper flowers
And fed the hungering grasses with furtive fingers
Dipped in distant sweetnesses.

A verse away a jeweled weed was fruitful,
More fragrant than a pheasant pear,
Bramble berries brimmed with wildwood voices
And tallest thistles wore a purple crown of praise.

A verse away the world was kinder:
Between my word and world
The distance was a poem.

A CHILD ESCAPES

Already she has the wingéd look of seraphim,
Hinting at shining secrets in her hymn
Of love, and yet, and yet, a child escapes
The golden robes and runs about in naked shapes
My hands once blessed as if to drape
About her nakedness a velvet robe.
But now my hands speak distant words
In parables of fish and birds,
And pray she understands my creeds
And fables better than the word that pleads
For gratitude and gifts of softness.

WHEN CHILDREN SPEAK

When children speak
In fleecy syllables of clouds
And trail their budding words
Across the meadows of the mind,
The utterance of doves is harsh
And innocent of mist
Lies guilty on the grass.

Where children walk
The smallest grasses dance
A sarabande from leaf to leaf,
Lodging a seed belief
Credulous as early grass
Where children pass.

PATTERN OF PAIN

The furtive fret stirring in massive stone
Lies in my hand: a cat with indrawn claws.
Perhaps the ache glowed green in jade,
Concealed a precious pain in amber gem.

Perhaps the sting of stone
Dissolved to dust,
And yet for all time it shall be
Pattern of pain in a leaf, in a tree.

A MARINER'S HAWAII

So here you lie, Hawaii,
within a sea
that murmurs out to silence.
Somehow, you make me think of home,
although you look no whit
like any home of mine.
Quite possibly, Hawaii, it's
because you're simply everyman's
idea of an Eden.
To one who's been so long at sea,
Hawaii, my own mainland home
seems paradise remembered.
Your warmth is welcome for awhile:
your humor, too, but not
for very long.
Your ocean breathes its silences,
Hawaii — but an echo's lost
somewhere beyond your coasts.

ELEGY TO A JAPANESE GARDEN

Sundissention:

each slain ray
lies splintered
prismatically
in rows between
tall fountains,
arranged
in rainbow bouquets.

Descending
into unity,
a tune
— plaintively
rendered —
blossoms in an
inimitable
Oriental mode
throughout sequestered
pathways.

Far from all radiance

. . . in semidarkness
where jade
holds ivory
in abeyance,
and jasminian
luxury contends
with cedar's
aromatics . . .

a melodic
condolence
is conveyed
to lamenting
shadows.

In twilight, then,
the garden slumbers
as its unseen virtuoso
creates
his intangible,
dragon-scale
mosaic.

This poem will shortly appear in *Japan: Theme and Variations, A Collection of Poems by Americans,* Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, Vermont.

"THE BROTHER OF DEATH DAILY HAUNTS US"

— *Urn Buri*

Glittering in this abandoned night
Your eyes embrace me:
You steal from teardrop star
And momentary moon the flash of shadow.
Come to me with your love.
Through fantasies of pain that roar
With the sound of wings
Upon your dread, wet brow, come
To me here in flame.
Obey the old and roaming memory
And into my heart hurl your soul.

We will plunge with the swan and die.

DUST

Upon our windowpane,
cast by a riot in the sky,
stand sparkling lines
of land once proud to freight
the burdened fruit now hid
by man-neglected scar.

Lining the common street
in pile of desert drift,
these waves, these pieces

from the floor of everywhere,
now lean upon themselves,
storm-late imposing.

Who wrote from dust to dust
knew not that time and we
are strangers.
Dust among the grains of dust
we move our varied way
into our varied luck.

MOST TRULY HUMAN

In sense my armor's rent
By autumn tinges of a leaf —
It sways, it breaks, it falls:
Courier of the garden's

Newly fragile dissonance. And down,
Despite the stormy interruption,
My leaf sinks deep down deep
To pass the entr'act

Unverbalized, asleep. The ever-wary
Question mark abides, impends;
Then gestures by the bare pragmatic
Wands, rehearsed from books

Unopened, poems unpenned,
Like great Olympian sentries toasting
Life, evoke the matrix to unfold:
A leaf again! Behold, my leaf!

THE CHAIR

In silence stolen from space
in light flowing through luminous legs
to a music phrased in sweet measures of wood
I implore you to hold my weariness
rearrange the weight I must carry here
to the illusion of rest.

In your dark simplicity
rung joining rung where words join to praise,
in your never-completeness,
borrowing reality from the room
I lean my trembling nerves
asking your translation of peace.

If I were fluid
waving like wheat in the wind
I could move above
your changeless glow, your ephemeral lustre
matching the motion singing from your wood.

If I were lacquer
to smooth fatigue with comprehension
your patience, practiced and perfect,
would quicken my hope.

Ah, when the lamp tips its sunflower face
over the hunch of your shoulder

to spirit the shadows as light trembles in wine,
I rejoice in your giving
not rest, or assurance out of silence,
but spirit brushed over and over you, clinging
from your simple dedication, your tangible moments of life.

ARCHITECTURAL AND GREEN

Freshly blooming in the eye's deep well
elliptical seeds of mind are growing,
singing of grasses blowing.

Down through spirally fisted leaves
into the potent pulse of the tree
sun slips noiselessly.

Over knuckled rock and rotted timber
young moss creeps to satin the old
webbing the grey color of cold.

Under an intricate net of shadows
a katydid wings from fern to rush
that weaves under weight of a thrush.

In the magical circle composing our world
the spectrum spins, the inner light crooking
and green is a way of looking.

SURELY PROPHETIC REEFS OF MUSIC

Shouldn't there be a landfall sometime soon?
Sea-weary, we have knelt below so long,
telling our wishes like beads. Bronze cannon turn
green with the patina of grief. Our gunners
have long forgot their skill; their fuses crumble.
There have been no enemy, no battle; and our manhood
rots, and our cutlasses rust.

Shouldn't there have been an island before now?
Shouldn't a bird, anonymous, land-eyed,
have flapped by us slowly at noon? And shouldn't a leaf,
bent by the sea and faded but looking like ivy
that we remember, have floated by? (O forests
that foam with a million boughs!) Here are the waves'
green and the seaweed's green alone.

Shouldn't there be an oceanless sound by now?
Shouldn't the bubbling of bells now break beyond
this park of water? Aren't there sparrows stirring
in eaves by roofs that slope for us, and voices
of men who wait for us as we for them —
joyful? Surely prophetic reefs of music
will lift from the silent sea soon.

Leaf, bird, and bell are longed for. O but men
to hail us into harbor are our great hunger
after this cold voyage, this wild waiting!

Shouldn't there be a landfall sometime soon?

JAMES E. WARREN, JR.

EDGAR ALLEN POE

All ebony, all scarlet — and, of course,
he tunnels gravely under cypress roots
to surface by pale palaces. And, worse,
five candelabra lean and flare; and lutes

make pandemonium. And bones on bones,
miasmas on miasmas bring us pain.
But we are patient, pleased and bored at once,
that Poe is frightening himself again.

LUCY PRICE

PASSIVE

Dashing dilettante of love,
Abject in all but pursuit,
Desultory at less than lust,
Love me, love me if you must.
With a perfunctory salute
Endearing, keep my love astute.
I'm just a pinion in your gay
World to court and then abandon.
Grace your garlands at my feet;
Cull me like unworthy wheat.

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I SHALL BUY A CANE

Someday
And pretend
That I am a fop.

I shall
Handle it carelessly
As if it aided me not at all
In walking.

And I shall not care
If people say to each other,
"He is just an old man,
Pretending."

PEOPLE

Look at me and frown and say
"He ought to behave
More decorously
Now he is old."

But I think
That if a man has never lived
By decorum
It would be cowardly
To start now.

And if he has lived
By decorum all his life,
I think it is high time
That he kick up his heels
Before death shall lay him
By them.

LISA GRENELLE

SPANIARD

Only a Goya could survive
this age of artifice and agony;
indict the decade his heart demanded.

True to root and role, peasant,
court painter, lover of Alba;
fatuous father of many children . . .

Goya reveling in bull-fight and battle
with ferocious integrity. . . .

Was it cruelty or mercy
that deafness should at last spare him
all disconcerting noise,
leave him alone
to his witches and his wisdom?

EYELIDS

Kaleidoscope eyelids color the dark
Splash it absinthe fire it shooting star
Petal it orchid swirl it snowstorm
Inside the crystal ball
Neons Northern lights crown jewels
Finger painting gone to eyelids
Tumbling crystals flying beads
Peacock Polka dot pirouette
Silvering milkweed lustre weave
Sprills and spirals
Bits of colored glass
Blue flame

LOST LIGHTNING

Wings paled by boardwalk blaze,
Lost firefly
In a jar of jitter lights,
First flasher
Before fire, before Benjamin's kite and key

Lightning
Of woodlands, marshes, meadows,
Fire of the bush,
Bloom of night gardens,
Lighter of lawns,
Country cousin

Among the show of jewels,
The fashion lights

Green pale across the sand
Where late swimmers
Streak the waves to phosphorescence,
Out over the water,
Cold fire of earth
To cold fire of sea

PHYLLIS HANSON

ACROSS THE YEARS

No voice delayed you from the calm
That shook the world apart.
But at the core
Of time's green mile
A dream had lived awhile.
And when forever broke
Upon the tenuous measure of your day,
Of all it was that mattered
Only silence spoke,
But never quite so clearly that you woke.

Jocelyn Macy Sloan

MIRACLE

There were angels in the house. They were everywhere.
Towards the end of goblin night, he became aware
that the room was feathery gold; he felt wings stir

fanning above his bed. *It's not a holy day,*
except for their presence here — Lord, will they stay?

He'd not been familiar with angels. Just as the sun
burnished earth while birds marveled, he entertained One,
the real Host, who offered both bread and wine.

Guy Owen

HAWK

Brute hawk wings pump the private air;
He spells my yard. His shadow slants,
A hungry curse that bruises earth
And chills the blood beneath his shank.

Nothing not stone could bear desire
So strong in eye or wing. The urge
To life recalls too late the chick
Where shadow and the source converge. . . .

Mine the cry your talons bear,
Mine the down your noon-day haul;
And my hunger hovers where
Spills the blood our beak lets fall.

MY MOTHER'S CROSS

My mother moved from dark to dark,
Her bones an aching cross to bear
The stretch of raw and punished flesh
Until dark ravens lodged her hair.

Her only light shone in three sons
Who tamed the earth to field or wood,
Yet could not plunge beneath her eyes
Nor shore her solitary rood;

And thus she moved from black to black,
Until we could not call her back.

MOMENT

The banjo-picking rain
ceaselessly invites.
The skirts of leaves are whirling
to the fluting reeds, the roll
of frog-drum holds the beat
in the banjo-picking rain
of Spring.

RED ROSE

Red rose
swaying above
the tainted soil
red rose, vile rose
swaying above
what might have
    been my child.

Scarlet rose
swaying in the wind
as children dance
red rose, vile rose
gently your petals
lie as children's hands
on the tainted soil.

Vile rose
I'd snap your stem
if it would snap
you from my mind
grave deep soil.
Crimson Rose!

EVELYN TOOLEY HUNT

MAN WITH GREEN HAIR
(Portrait of a Generation)

This man was born too late — or lost too soon. . . .
Somewhere his past has sunk beneath the sea
In ancient memories of depth, of noon
As dim as emerald dusk, of swimming free
Before mutation dragged him to the shore,
Dripping and gasping, where his courage bled
Against the rocks of destiny, before
He knew, in fact, that all his past was dead.

Strangely impelled, he gropes among the weeds
For non-existent paths to let him through,
As, born too late to satisfy his needs
And homesick for a home he never knew,
Or lost too soon, fretted and torn, he fails
To compensate for once-protecting scales.

FOLK LORE MONEY

The plant called Honesty
stitches its germ with a spider thread
to a delicate disk
of mother-of-pearl
and makes all trim,
binding each cover of brittle rush
with a withey wisp on the rim.

Seeds and cover follow the wind
and disks gleam forth
like frosty baubles from the North,
or moths in a moonlight swarm,
or phosphorescent coin — still bright
on the dark counter of the night.

I COULD NOT TOUCH

I could not touch your entering
    But heard you cleave
The midnight portal of my room
    And heard you weave
The private story of my doom
Where our two loves were centering.
        Now sense,
    That you are gone, revives
    Your hand upon my feverish hand,
    Blood and bone thrive
    And the delicate hair against the nerve-end
        Proclaims your presence.

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